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But Which Cities Will We Protect?

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THE DEBATE behind the closed doors of the House Armed Services Committee last week was a weird mixture of far-out science fiction and court-house politics. The subject: Should an immediate start be made in installing an anti-ballistic missile system and where?

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara presented his case for holding off to see if an agreement can be reached with the Soviet Union to stop this threatening new round in the nuclear arms race. Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made his argument for going ahead on the ground that an ABM system will help to deter the Soviet Union from starting a nuclear war.

Then the fireworks began. The Army has two separate plans for deploying an ABM system. Since no system could protect the entire Nation, one plan would protect 25 cities, the other and more costly system 50 cities.

But which cities? Several committee members complained bitterly that they saw no reason why Washington should determine who will have a chance to live and who will be condemned to die in the event of a nuclear attack. They wanted to know how the cities were chosen.

THE WITNESS was Lt. Gen. Austin W. Betts, chief of research and development for the Army. He said the decision was made by computer on the basis of density of population. Then why, critical committee members demanded, is Charleston, S.C., on the list of 25?

There was a certain amount of wry snickering around the table. It happens that Charleston is the home town of L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the committee and an unfailing champion of military against civilian authority.

Nothing could show more dramatically the difficulty, if not the impossibility, quite apart from the technical problems of trying to protect part of the Nation and conceding that aside from the 25 or 50 cities the balance will face nuclear attack undefended. There was even some grumbling that Washington should be on the list. Protect all those bureaucrats when the vital core of government gets into the air and lands on the ground at the first alert?

This is probably why McNamara will win the debate. That depends, of course, on how the talks with the Soviets on limiting both offensive and defensive weapons progress following Premier Alexei N. Kosygin's go-ahead in his letter to President Johnson.

The difference between McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff is simple. Wheeler's argument for going ahead with the first \$330 million of spending to put an ABM system in place is based on the contention that the Soviet Union will not respond by stepping up its offensive missile power. Therefore, the United States would be in a much more secure position with the ABM.

McNAMARA, on the other hand, sees no reason at all to doubt that the Soviets will respond by putting in more missiles and more powerful missiles. Both sides will, in short, escalate at enormous cost and at the end of a decade the nuclear standoff will be virtually what it is today, with casualties on each side in the order of 90 million to 120 million.

In his testimony McNamara dismissed the conflict within the intelligence community over just what the Soviets are doing in putting ABMs around Moscow and in developing a system called Tallinn which may or may not be superior. It doesn't matter, McNamara said in effect. We are increasing our offensive capability—already three to four times that of the Soviets—to such a point that it will offset even the most-advanced defense system.

On the cost of an ABM system the Secretary of Defense was unequivocal. He told the committee: "I'm willing to bet you now and give you ten-to-one odds that if I come back here at the end of a decade and a ballistic missile defense has been installed the bill will not be less than \$40 billion."

Actually, as with all Pentagon price tags, the estimated initial cost is likely to be no more than a down payment. If you protect against missiles, so the argument will go, then you must also put in a defense system against manned bombers. And with an ABM in place you can hardly survive without an underground shelter system. Up to \$2 billion has already been spent on Nike-Zeus and Nike X missile research. The new budget provides an added \$440 million. This is, in short, a critical moment in the long seesaw of the nuclear arms race.